FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
December 16, 2001

FEAR NOT
John M. Buchanan

There are, Vaclav Havel, once said, different ways of waiting. There is waiting without carrying hope within ourselves; sitting, waiting for salvation to come from the outside. At the other end of the spectrum are those who wait with faith, and who fight for truth even when they are defeated and beaten back a hundred times. This is the kind of waiting that sends forth seeds out of which change and progress may one day grow. The difference is between waiting for lilies to appear that have never been planted, and doing your utmost to help good seeds find nourishment in rocky soil.

Madeleine Albright

FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 146

Isaiah 35:1-10
Matthew 11:2-11

Strengthen the weak hands, make firm the feeble knees...Say to those of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear!" Isaiah 35:3,4

Dear God, in this busiest week of the year, with so much yet to do, give us moments of quiet — to hear, once again, the good news of a savior's birth. As angels sang and light shone all around, startle us, O God, once again, with your truth and your goodness and your love: through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Everybody has a favorite Christmas carol, or several favorites..."Silent Night, Holy Night" is on everybody's list.

On his popular radio show, *Prairie Home Companion* — last evening, Garrison Keeler transported his audience, which included me, with a wonderful story about a German professor of theology on sabbatical from his teaching position in Dusseldorf who was living for a year in Lake Wobegon. Professor Schweiger who had given up on the "God part" of Christmas long ago — had lost his faith teaching theology and just didn't believe anymore...On Christmas Eve he was invited to attend the children's pageant at Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility. He took a walk instead and saw the church from afar and heard the children singing, and Keilor began to hum softly into the microphone..."*Silent Night, Holy Night*" and without urging or even inviting, his entire audience began to hum along softly, became that children's choir in a mythical little town in Minnesota.

Silent Night, Hark the Herald Angels Sings, Angels We Have Heard on High...

Near the top of my list for years has been *"O Little Town of Bethlehem, How Still We See Thee Lie..."*

It was written by a prominent American clergyman, Phillips Brooks, after a trip to Bethlehem in the last century — at a very difficult time in the life of this country — the year was 1868. *O Little Town of Bethlehem* contains a line that for me continues to gather up the deeper and best meanings of the birth of Jesus.

"Yet in thy dark streets
shineth
The everlasting light.
The hopes and fears of all
the years,
are met in thee tonight."

That's what it's about..."the hopes and fears of all the years," even after we learn that Bethlehem doesn't look at all like the Hallmark cards portray it, that it's not a little town anymore — but a city, a very busy city, a tourist trap actually, with lots of buses normally, and crowds of visitors, and shops selling olivewood figurines, and vendors pushing and shoving, thrusting nativity postcards in your face, and churches — crowded, ornate, with long lines of hot and impatient pilgrims.

It's still a favorite even when you learn that a tragic conflict, a war it seems, is going on there just now.

The "hope and fears of all the years" — this year particularly, it seems to me, a year in which both hope and fear have been brought to the surface of our cultural life: and into very sharp focus for everyone of us, a year which for many Americans "fear" suddenly has a new and powerful meaning.

There is inside of each of us a place for fear, and a good thing it is. There are things in this world worth being afraid of. Appropriate fear keeps us from making foolish and dangerous mistakes. We come with two built-in fears the psychologists tell us — fear of falling and fear of abandonment.

But fear can also be a great enemy of life, the great impediment to love and hope and passion and joy...

"Do not be afraid," the angel says to the startled shepherds on the hillside outside of the little town of Bethlehem. The way Luke tells it, "the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were terrified" and the first words they heard were "Fear not." Something amazing is about to happen. Something is about to happen that changes everything. But don't be afraid.

Walter Brueggemann says that's what Christian faith is about — "Fear Not." Brueggemann is a very distinguished Old Testament scholar, maybe the best. He is also a great teacher and preacher. I heard him engage a group of clergy — who were there to hear his scholarly observations on this or that — by asking us to recall a time when, as children, we were frightened: maybe lying in bed, sure that the shadows on the wall were of a monster hiding and the bumps and creaks on the stairway were the portent of something dreadful about to happen. And we called out to our father or mother who appeared and took us in his or her arms and said, "Everything is all right. Don't be afraid." That, Brueggemann says, is what faith is about. And it is the primary, fundamental and persistent message in the Bible.

- When Moses is becoming nervous about the dangers of leading his people out of Egypt, God says, "Fear not. I will be with you."

- To a frightened nation, quaking before the might of a cruel and overwhelmingly powerful enemy — "Fear not. I will be with you."

- To any who face the ultimate threat to life..."Even though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me."

- To shepherds startled in the middle of the night by a bright light and angel choruses "Fear not."

- And at the very end of the story, to frightened disciples at an open tomb, "Fear not. He is not here. He is risen."

One time, one of Jesus' allies, a cousin actually, John the Baptist, was in prison, in trouble because he had criticized King Herod. John's prospects, to say the least, were not good. John had been Jesus' advocate, had recognized in Jesus the righteousness and holiness and presence of God. John was a fiery preacher, calling religious leaders a "den of snakes," talking about laying the axe to the roots of the tree and burning the dry branches in a consuming fire. John the Baptist was no Mr. Rogers. But now he's in prison and he's having some misgivings. In the first place, Jesus isn't acting the way John thought that the Messiah should act. He isn't talking about laying the axe to the roots and burning dry branches. In fact, he isn't judging and condemning sinners at all. What kind of Messiah would befriend sinners, be seen with them, eat with them? What kind of Messiah would spend his time with unrighteous, unclean men and women instead of insisting that everybody obey the law of Moses? What kind of religion would it be that emphasized inclusivity and kindness instead of purity and exclusiveness?

But, in the second place, maybe John is scared. He's alone. It's dark and damp in the tiny cave where he is kept like an animal. The King he has publicly humiliated is the pettiest and cruelest of tyrants. John is going to die and he knows it. So maybe the reason he doubts, and asks Jesus to reassure him that he's right, that he's about to die for something true, not a vain hope, is that he's frightened.

Jesus sends his friend an intimate but coded message. Tell John, he says, that the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the leapers are cleansed, the deaf hear. That's an almost direct quotation from a passage of their scripture everybody knew and loved: a lyrical poem by their great prophet/poet Isaiah. John's captors would not know it or understand it. Jesus is pointing John to the 35th chapter of Isaiah.

> "the eyes of the blind , shall be opened,
> and the ears of the deaf unstopped,
> then the lame shall leap like a deer,
> the wilderness and the dry land shall be glad.

Remember John, as you sit there, in that cell — cold, hungry, thirsty, waiting for your inevitable execution — remember the promise, that came to our people at the darkest, most frightening moment in their lives, the worst moment in our history, when a cruel and powerful enemy was about to attack and kill and defeat and imprison and exile....

Remember:

> "They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God...
> Strengthen the weak hands,
> and make firm the feeble knees.
> Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
> "Be strong, do not fear!"

Bob Greene wrote a thoughtful column last week, which recalled Franklin D. Roosevelt's famous statement during the Depression: "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself," and how it reassured a frightened nation. Greene suggested that it's different since September 11, that if all we have to fear is fear itself — it's enough. "Today," he wrote, "fear is not a byproduct — it is the primary item. Evidently those who attacked us do not want our land, our riches, our buildings. What they want is our terror...Fear itself is their goal."

And as a matter of fact the fear quotient among us has escalated significantly, amplified by occasional announcements from the new Department of Homeland Security and the FBI that something terrible might happen somewhere to someone and so we all should be alert. Which translates — be frightened. "Fear," Bob Greene thinks, "is the new currency of the land — a new industry, a way of life."

We've always known that the power of fear is a motivator and market force. Fear sells car alarms and security systems. Fear sells guns — ironically, increasing significantly the possibility that they will be used to shoot and kill members of one's own family. Fear causes population shifts as refugees move across international borders and as city dwellers head to the suburbs.

And fear limits and paralyzes. Fear of failing prevents us from trying something new, stretching and risking. Children humiliated by a teacher are afraid to speak up and ask a question — sometimes for the rest of their lives. Fear of rejection keeps us from going out for the team, trying out for the part, applying for the job. Sometimes fear of rejection — or fear of intimacy — prevents us from saying — "I love you, I want you." Fear prevents us from striving for greatness. Someone said that — "if Michelangelo had been afraid of heights, we'd have the Sistine Floor." Peter Gnomes says fear, not sin, is the curse on human life, and that when Jesus Christ frees you from your fears, your fear of death, you are literally given your life back.

There is something paralyzing about fear, something that reduces the scope of our lives, the extent of our love, the depth of our passion, the generosity of our giving.

Bob Greene is right. There are a lot of shaking hands and trembling knees in our nation this year. Of course, new security precautions are appropriate — as we have learned in the past three months. I even contributed my favorite Swiss Army pocketknife to a huge box of corkscrews,

nail files and other pocketknives at O'Hare. Greene reminded us that before 1973 there were no security restrictions to speak of at airports and that we live in a very different world now. It will be important in the days ahead, that fear of what might happen not become our primary motivation; as for instance, we debate what civil liberties we need to sacrifice, what judicial procedures for apprehending, holding, questioning, and trying suspected persons we can implement without losing something of the precious liberty we are defending. It will be important not to give the terrorist the victory of terrifying us, diminishing us, limiting and restricting us, convincing us to live out of fear and not love and kindness and compassion and courage.

Of course, we're afraid. You can't talk yourself out of fear. Who isn't afraid that something will happen, that the plane will crash, the test will come back positive, the condition will be terminal. Who isn't afraid ontologically, as the philosophers put it, of non-being, of a world without us in it, of death, to put it plainly. Of course, we are afraid, as were those people 2,700 years ago watching the Assyrian army with all it's chariots and horses and armored troops bearing down on their weak militia.

Faith not does not mean that fear disappears. It means going on doing what you need to do, going on with your living, your loving, your caring, your passion in spite of your fear, because something has happened that is more real, more pervasive, more powerful, more to be trusted than whatever it is you are afraid of — even you own death. "Courage," Anne Lamott says, "is just fear that has said it's prayers."

At the end of his recent book, *The Eyes of the Heart: A Memoir of the Lost and Found,* Frederick Buechner, tells about his only brother, Jamie, who lived in Manhattan, alone — a private, dignified, proper gentleman who was dying of cancer. Buechner visited him when the end was obviously near.

They talked and then Jamie asked for a favor. Buechner writes:

> "He never went to church except once in a while to hear me and he didn't want a funeral, he told me — too much like a direct question, I suppose — but when I suggested maybe cocktails and dinner for some of his old friends in the fall when everybody gets back to the city, he said that sounded like a good idea. But he did ask me if I would write a prayer for him that he could use and keep on the table by his bedside." [Page 163]

Buechner wrote for his brother...and for all of us...

> "Dear Lord, bring me through darkness into light. Bring me through pain into peace. Bring me through death into life. Be with me wherever I go, and with everyone I love. In Christ's name I ask it. Amen."

So may this Advent season in this extraordinary year and this Christmas that comes at just the right time — remind us of that very simple truth. The hopes and the fears of all the years are met in something that God did long ago.

God has come among us.
God's love is the most powerful reality in the world and in your life.
God's love lives among us and in us....

Therefore,
Strengthen the weak hands
Make firm the feeble knees.
Say to those who are of a fearful
heart,
"Be strong. Do not fear!"

Amen.